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THE ROUND TABLE

SOME WAYS IN WHICH OUR TEACHING OF COLLEGE COMPOSITION IS INEFFECTIVE

He who observes the teaching of college composition and comparable work in the business world notes a decided lack of efficient management in our college courses. Few instructors assemble facts and make an open-minded analysis of their problem. Time is lost unnecessarily in the classroom. There is waste effort on the part of both instructor and student in doing their work. Instructors give poor service in the handling of manuscript. There is little sentiment requiring instructors to study the efficiency of their own efforts, and the universities give practically no preparation along this line to their graduate students.

Our teaching shows a surprising lack of co-operation. The lack of real co-operation between the instructor in composition and his colleagues in other departments remains an unsolved problem. We miss valuable chances for co-operation between instructor and student; between the students in a given course; and between instructors giving similar work in different institutions.

The students who have completed the required training in composition do not speak and write English with the degree of correctness and accuracy which may fairly be demanded. Some instructors are lax in grading. Some are uncertain about a reasonable minimum standard. There is almost no systematic, aggressive, follow-up work done after students leave the required courses. Campus sentiment does not require good English.

Our training too often leaves a student helpless to meet the simple demands of everyday life. Training in oral expression is largely specialized, helping only the few who are concerned with oratory or dramatic interpretation or formal debate. Theme assignments are too largely subjective and are not parallel with typical writing problems of actual life. In criticism and grading, instructors tend to place a premium on cleverness, the ability to turn a neat phrase, and "knowing life" rather than on judgment, analytic power, and skill in handling facts and ideas with accuracy and independence.

We fail to inspire the dynamic interest of our students. They can do much toward teaching themselves to write, if only they want to learn.

At present they are likely to catch little interest from the instructor's attitude toward his work and his students. They find themselves lost in a big machine, with little chance to develop skill along the lines of their own needs. They can see little or no connection between the assigned readings and themes and the use of speech and writing which lies ahead of them in their own lives. They are seldom invited to submit writing done outside the course, with that warm interest bred of actuality, in partial fulfilment of course requirements.

The teaching of composition is a big *human* problem, in which the imparting of knowledge is a mere incident. Why not come out of our self-complacency, get in fuller contact with life outside academic walls, and work aggressively to make our teaching service more effective? This is enough to stir the imagination and challenge the ambition of the ablest teacher.

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OUR RHETORIC SLAVE

Most departments of English have slaves; in many, their labor is distinctly unskilled and must of necessity be so, in the field of theme-reading. As every teacher knows, the judiciousness, the tactfulness, the constructive suggestiveness of good theme-reading is perhaps the most highly specialized of his whole work. He knows, too, that the comments on the themes are the most stimulating motive possible for the class discussions and for conferences. And yet, this delicate work is frequently turned over to a graduate student or to a Senior who writes well and who needs the money, inexperienced in criticism and detached from the work of the course though he be. The theme-reading goes along the severe and hide-bound lines of amateur criticism, and the class work loses much of its pointedness. Good results are, to speak charitably, less certain than they should be in an age of efficiency.

The reason for such a state of affairs is, of course, the great bulk of work for him who gives composition courses. There is too much to be done for him to handle even the essentials of the work alone; there are many things that he would have to leave undone. There are some things, nearly as essential, which he cannot get in as it is. One of these overlooked items, in many colleges, is the reading of the revised or rewritten themes; the instructor simply has to leave that work to the earnestness and honor of the students. He cannot handle all the themes